

Make of Heaven and Earth

Last week Pastor Steve started us off on a new sermon series based on the Apostle's Creed. The Apostle's Creed is our oldest statement of what we believe as Christians. And the Apostle's Creed is a statement of faith that applies to all Christians everywhere despite denomination. If you read my little blurb about the Apostle's creed in the Chimes you know that a creed and a confession are not the same thing. A creed applies to all Christians and all denominations, whereas confessions, like the Westminster Confession, are specific to denominations and historical movements. But the Apostle's creed is timeless and therefore worth our exploring. It is important to be able to say what is true about God as we are going to get to know God. And Pastor Steve first preached on the Trinity last Sunday because that is the basic structure of the creed. There is a section on the Father, then son Jesus, and then the Holy Spirit. This week we start digging into the details of the creed line by line. There are actually twelve lines or statements of truth in the Apostle's Creed. And we begin with "maker of heaven and earth." The concept that God created everything and what that means for us, if anything.

Our next scripture reading comes from Nehemiah chapter 9. Nehemiah is not a book we spend a lot of time in, but I thought it was important because of what was happening to Israel. Israel has returned from exile, they have repented of the sins that got them into exile in the first place. And when they begin to praise God for bringing them back, the first thing they praise God for is being the creator. For some reason, which we will look at in a little bit, recognizing God as creator should be part of our praise. So let's look at Nehemiah chapter 9, beginning at verse 1.

"On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. ³ They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God. ⁴ Standing on the stairs of the Levites were Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani. They cried out with loud voices to the LORD their God. ⁵ And the Levites—Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah—said: "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting." "Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶ You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you."

I have to tell you that I had a crazy week this week. Every day was a list of things or challenges that I am not equipped to handle. It was a week of things that they did not teach me in seminary. I had to help a member having problems with immigration. I was on the phone with immigration lawyers and the sheriff and the judge's office. I don't have a degree in immigration law and I have no idea how all that stuff works. I had to work with staff and volunteers trying to prepare for how corona virus might affect our operations. I spoke with doctors and read CDC and World Health Organization reports and shopped for hand sanitizer. I don't have a degree in infectious diseases or epidemiology. I have no idea how this stuff works either. We also hosted part

of the festival in Salt Lake for the American Choral Director's Association in this building. We had thousands of people through the building this week. I had to figure out how to manage crowd flow and the strain it would put on the building itself as well as the staff and the volunteers and frankly the strain on the bathrooms. Again, I don't have a degree in business management or building management and I don't know how all this stuff works. I am also helping our presbytery find a new executive presbyter. That is basically the person that leads the Presbyterian denomination in the state of Utah. It is an exciting process, but I have never searched for a new EP before. I don't have a degree in HR. I don't really know how this process works. We are also in the process of improving building security. We have had a security assessment done in the last few months and have recommendations for improvements that we are now trying to get bids and grants for. Again, I don't have a degree in law enforcement and so again I don't know how all this stuff works.

And as I started this sermon on Friday morning, note that I am usually done my sermons on Thursdays, this one didn't get started until Friday morning, I realized as I began a sermon on creation that I don't really know how any of that, out there, works either. And the cool thing is that it just works without me. I did not do anything to make the sun come up, or the sun go down. The birds continued their lives whether I did anything or not. When I got too busy to even fill the bird feeders this week they went on and found natural food in the snow melt. The herd of deer behind my house did not even seem to notice my coming or going. There is a complex web of nature out there that God designed and created, and scientists are still just scratching the surface of how immense it is.

Scientists estimate that there are about 8.7 million species in the world. That's a lot of complexity when you think all of them need to be studied down to a cellular level. But what does it mean for us if God created all that? Now I am not going to go into how God created this morning. We don't know how God created everything we see and even don't see. Millions of years came before us and we are just beginning to learn about that in the last 100 years. This is not a sermon on how God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are poetry, not a science book. But if what a scientist would call intelligent design, or what we call God, if God really created all of this, what does it mean for us? Do we just go ahead and enjoy it? Or is there more?

Well, if we see God as, as this Apostle's Creed puts it, creator of the heavens and the earth, it means God created everything, and everything out of nothing. Everything out of nothing. This means God came before anything created. Why is this important? Well, in ancient times many civilizations worshipped the sun or stars or moon. Even today many are tempted to worship creation rather than the creator of it. When the Apostle's creed states that God made both the heavens and then earth, this puts the God of Israel over the stars and the sun. It puts God first. It puts God before everything else. As early as the first and second centuries, as this creed was first being formed, Greek philosophy was already arguing that God was an architect of pre-existing matter. That matter already existed and then God formed it into the design we see. But that is not what the Bible tells us. The Bible tells us that God created all matter. Everything is created by God from nothing. That is why this line of the Apostle's creed is here. It was important to early Christians that we understand that from God came all life, everything that there is. It was important to the Israelites in that Nehemiah passage as well. They say in verse 6 "You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it." The distinction that God created everything has been important since the book of Genesis. Why is this important to our understanding of God?

Well for one it tells us that God has authority. Now you may be thinking “well duh, of course God has authority,” but do we really give God authority in our thinking? As human beings we tend to treat creation and our lives like we own things. Right? We buy land. In our minds we own it. But if God is creator we are stewards, not owners. A creator God means God has authority. This is in our opening Psalm this morning. It says “In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” God has authority. Do we live as if God has authority?

When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. “Excuse me,” Governor Herter said, “do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?” “Sorry,” the woman told him. “I’m supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person.” “But I’m starved,” the governor said. “Sorry,” the woman said again. “Only one to a customer.” Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. “Do you know who I am?” he said. “I am the governor of this state.” “Do you know who I am?” the woman said. “I’m the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister.”

Sometimes I think God is probably standing there saying to me “Do you know who I am?” When I make decisions without even regarding what God would want in that decision, when I claim authority in a situation that I do not even have, when I let the fears of this world consume my thinking, I think God is standing there asking “Do you know who I am?” God is the creator, which means God has the authority. But I think we try to strip God of his authority often.

Recognizing that God is the creator of all things, including us, means we know more about the image of God. The image in which we are created. It tells us more about God and as a result, more about us. When a child is born it bears some image of its parents. Right? Who do they look like? Are they the spitting image of mom or dad? When little Louisa Parrish was born to Nate and Shannon, our youth leaders, she looked like a mini Shannon. It was Shannon’s face in that baby blanket at the hospital. We wondered what Nathan actually had to do with the whole process. But now? Now Louisa is the tallest toddler in C Street School. And she is almost the youngest in her class, but the tallest. Daddy’s tall genes are coming into play now. But as she grows what will matter more is what attributes of her parents actions and beliefs she picks up. As a child grows it becomes less about the physical resemblance and more about how the child mirrors the attitudes, expressions, and character traits of his or her parents. Knowing God is our creator does the same thing for us. One commentator put it this way: “we likewise have the capacity to become more and more in the image of God; that is, we were created with the potential to mirror divine attributes.” Did you ever think of yourself that way? You are created to mirror divine attributes.

And this gets to the heart of the question of why God being the creator of all things matters. When we think about God as creator it is much less about the origins of the universe and much more about ordaining purpose. It is knowing that we are created out of design and for a purpose. God did not have to create, but God did. So all of creation, including people were created with both function and purpose. We are created with both function and purpose. Let’s look at function first. If we go back to Adam and Eve, they were placed in the garden to care for it. That was our intended role from the beginning. To care for creation while in relationship

with God. That role has not changed. We are still supposed to be caring for God's creation. How are we doing at that? What do you think? In the creation account in Genesis God instructs us to populate the earth and care for it, not abuse it or destroy it. And I think if we look around, we have done a lot more abusing than caring.

Commentator John Walton gives this example. He notes that he and his family go on vacation each year and when they do, they arrange for college students to stay at their home to take care of the dog and watch the house. It is their house, but they give the college students charge of it and tell them to use the benefits of it including the food in the fridge, and care for it. And he writes "If we get home and find that they have let all the food in the refrigerator rot rather than use it, we are disappointed at the waste. But imagine the disappointment we would feel if we found the house wrecked, or our things broken, or our dog dead." So we are to use the earth, enjoy its benefits, but we are supposed to watch for the line when good use crosses over to abuse.

Stewardship of the earth is a tricky subject. We know we should do it, but we get lost in the reason for why we should do it. And going back to God as creator can help us restore why caring for creation is important. Because if we go back to God as creator and God having authority, we realize that stewardship should not be for selfish gain. Walton puts it this way: "Stewardship, however, cannot be for our own sake or our own gain, nor for the sake of the rest of creation, but for the sake of God, the creator and possessor of all the earth. This is a...view that shows a respect for what belongs to God."

And then there is the relationship part. Function, to care for creation. But while in relationship with God. That becomes the purpose part. We are created to be in relationship with God. That has been the story from the beginning, from Adam all the way through the redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all the way to the gift of the Holy Spirit, all the way to the establishment of the church. We are supposed to be in relationship with God. Now think about it, If God created us, that means God knows us, right? If I were to ask all of you to draw and picture and then we put all the pictures up on the wall, would you know which one was yours? Of course, you would know because you drew it. You created it. So of course you know it. This means God knows us. We may not know God all that well, but we have a God that knows us.

And in return our first item in our relationship with God is to praise God for our creation. To recognize God's creator role in our praise. This is what was going on in that passage in Nehemiah. The first thing Israel praises God for after the repent of their sins is for God's creating role. This should be first in our praise. And I think this is intuitive to an extent. When you go outside and look at those amazing Wasatch mountains reaching up to the sky with their snowy peaks, don't you want to praise God? Well, that is what you were created for. To praise the God that created you and to be in relationship with that God.

Lastly, if God is creator and we were made for relationship, we were made for relationship not just with God, but with one another. We were created to be communal. Now, I admit, with a new virus running around it is easy to retreat. To withdraw. And I am more guilty of that than most people. I am an introvert and when they start talking on the news about staying home it is easy for me to say "fine, an excuse to stay home. I love to stay home." But we were created to be in relationship, to care for each other, to encourage each other, to learn together, to build each other up, to be the church. Now we may have to get creative in how to do this safely in the coming weeks and months, but I think it is important to remember how we are supposed to relate to one another and that this is part of our purpose in creation.

So, God as maker of heaven and earth. This one short line of the Apostles Creed. What does it imply? God came first, God has the authority, and God created us for a function and a purpose. When it comes to creation, one commentator wrote this which I liked. “We live in a world of rights that has no sense of purpose; we live in a world of tolerance that has no sense of dignity for those tolerated or conscience concerning what is to be tolerated; we live in a world of leisure and squander it on empty pursuit; we live in a world of comfort and convenience where we can accumulate anything we want except that which matters most.” If God is the creator, what matters most? How we relate to God, how we care for creation, and how we care for each other. How we be the church. That is why that truth “maker of heaven and earth” really matters. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.